

Commons-based Peer Production

INFO 290-04 (3 units)

Spring 2010; Lecture: Wednesday 2-4; Lab: Friday 2-3

Instructor: Brian W. Carver, Assistant Professor, School of Information.

Course Description:

The lowering of transaction and coordination costs through the internet, and the distribution of productive capital in the form of the personal computer has occasioned the rise of a form of production based on the collaborative efforts of autonomous individuals interacting online, often called "peer production." In this interdisciplinary graduate course, open to advanced undergraduates, students will analyze and contribute to some self-selected phenomena of peer production. An instructor-led component will seek to increase understanding of the challenges presented by and to peer production by both communicating the history and theory of network-enabled commons-based peer production. Students will further explore these issues through first-hand research or development experience contributing code, analyzing legal, policy, social, and managerial issues, evaluating user interfaces, or otherwise engaging directly with a peer production process. While open source and free software projects will receive significant attention, the course will seek to explore peer production in varied contexts and may include discussion of Wikipedia, crowd-sourced news aggregation sites, distributed computing projects, or other volunteer scientific or literary projects.

To accommodate the interests of students from multiple disciplines, the hands-on aspect of the course allows the student to choose from one of six tracks and to work alone or in a group:

- **Computer Science:** contribute code to an open source project or create a new project;
- **Management:** analyze a peer production community or communities to study management approaches that succeed and fail;
- **Law and Policy:** analyze potential legal issues facing a peer production community, ask whether such communities face unique legal challenges, and propose potential solutions;
- **Design:** study the user interface design used by a peer-produced product, proposing improvements.
- **Technical Writing:** contribute to a peer production process such as Wikipedia or contribute documentation for an open source project;
- **Social Science:** analyze the social dynamics, motivating factors, or persistent trends in a peer production community or across communities.

The above are illustrative examples and students may propose their own projects. Students in each track will be evaluated on the basis of written case analyses, proposals, and lab reports detailing their research on and contributions to a peer production process. Students are also encouraged to form groups across tracks focusing on the same peer production process or processes in order to collectively study multiple facets of the same phenomena.

Two hours of seminar per week. One hour of lab per week (devoted to the student's selected project, though students should expect to spend between 45-60 hours total on their project over the course of the semester).

Catalog Type: Special Topics

Units: 3

Prerequisites: None